

PRODUCT FEATURE

Using Stages to create meaningful and effective alternate assessment portfolios

By Madalaine Pugliese

Introduction

Amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA '97) mandate that all students with disabilities be included in each state's measures of accountability. There are three ways in which learners with special needs typically take part: they participate in the general education assessment methods; they use accommodations or modifications to the general education assessment methods; or they participate in performance-based portfolio assessment.

In theory, these strategies represent a hierarchy of assessment options. However, in many states, protocols for creating performance-based portfolios to be used for alternate assessment have yet to be agreed upon. Further, the protocols that have been established vary from state to state, so there is no universal process for collecting portfolio elements, determining relevant content or defining evaluation procedures. This article will define much needed contemporary terminology as well as discuss how Stages alternate assessment software takes advantage of assistive technology to facilitate authentic assessment.

Rationale

Assessment is a critical component in today's education system. However, in order to make meaningful use of the results, it is important to make sure that the assessment truly measures actual learner performance within a relevant curriculum. Because learners with special needs sometimes follow a modified or more custom curriculum, a typical standardized test is unlikely to provide meaningful measure. Not only do standardized inventories measure a more universally mandated content but they can also present barriers for learners with special needs, i.e., they may not be able to see the test

or be able to respond by holding and using a pencil.

Therefore, one of today's most challenging issues has arisen. If standardized inventories, even with accommodations, are not appropriate to measure some learners' actual performances, how then do we comply with IDEA and include all learners in meaningful and appropriate assessment programs?

Assessment is most meaningful when it is ongoing and conducted on a regular basis. Learners gain new understandings all the time. Progress might happen in small increments and can be documented to show skill mastery and also to help guide the next teaching steps. From this perspective, assessment

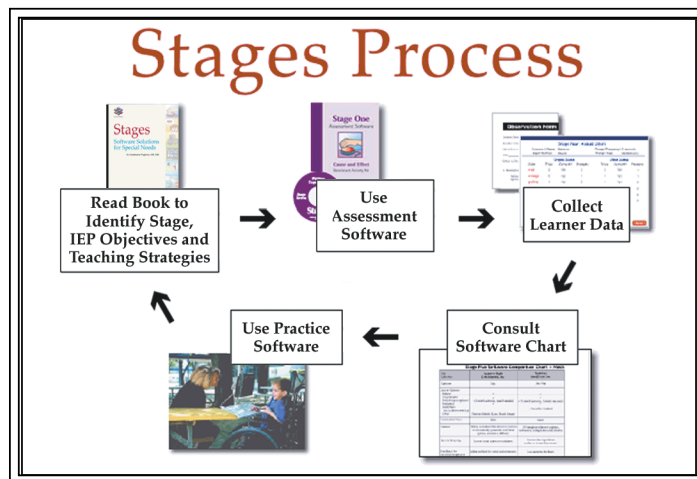
Address
526 Main St.
P.O. Box 68
Henderson, MN 56044

Phone
507-248-3294

Fax
507-248-3810

Web site
www.closingthegap.com

E-mail
info@closingthegap.com



Stages process

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embedded into the teaching and learning process helps educators and therapists to individualize curriculum specific to a learner's unique needs.

Definitions

The definitions listed in Figure 1 are used in discussions of alternate assessments. It is imperative that special education decision-makers use this terminology with common understanding in order to best address these contemporary issues.

About Stages

Stages is a developmental framework that provides a broad stroke look at a learner's cognitive and language abilities. This sequence of seven Stages is progressive in nature and is not age or grade specific. The appropriate Stage for a learner is the one where he or she is challenged, but not overwhelmed or frustrated. Stages materials include a book, assessment software and curriculum software recommended for practice between benchmark testing sessions.

Stages materials include universally accessible activities that facilitate an alternate assessment strategy. Because the software is deliberately designed to support the use of adaptive computer access devices, it is an important tool for collecting primary evidence from learners with the most intensive special needs. Stages content reflects the research of renowned educational experts and is correlated to national academic standards on an elementary level.

Over 10 years of research went into the design of the assessment activities and content being measured throughout all seven Stages. Child development milestones were investigated from noted experts such as Piaget. Language development benchmarks were gathered from the writings of Chomsky, while Beukelman's augmentative communication research helped to guide the content of the first three Stages.

How Stages alternate assessment tools work

Stages is not a formal assessment tool, but rather a set of benchmark activities designed on an instructional model that provides feedback and coaching. During Stages benchmark activities, the evaluator can print directly from any screen to capture a learner-generated product to place in the learner's portfolio. At the end of each activity, a report with instructional data about the time spent, choices made, response accuracy

Accommodations:
Changes in the routine administration of either the standardized test itself (such as providing a large print version) or to the testing environment (such as providing extra time), but does not include changes to the content. Accommodations provided do not affect the results of the assessment.
Alternate (or Alternative) Assessment:
A process for assessment other than standard testing procedures.
Assessment:
A formal procedure for collecting information about a learner for the purpose of evaluating progress and making decisions.
Authentic or Performance-based Assessment:
Competency-based strategies that demonstrate a learner's ability to apply skills to real-life or simulated real-world activities.
Benchmark test:
Results are not intended to provide a comparison to a broader group nor to a test publisher's criterion for mastery, but instead look at a learner's rate of growth within a skill set.
Modifications:
Changes to a standardized assessment test that substantially affect the results, such as providing fewer or simplified questions.
Norm- or Criterion-Referenced Assessment:
Results are interpreted by comparing a learner's performance with that of a specific group (such as age equivalent) or predetermined standard acceptable level of mastery (such as test publisher criterion).
Portfolio Assessment:
A compilation of a learner's work or documentation of a learner's performance collected by those who support the educational goals. Portfolios are typically presented in a print format, but the contents may be gathered and organized in electronic portfolios.
Primary Evidence:
Products that document a student's mastery of concepts, skills, or content (such as samples of student work, regularly collected student performance data, and video of a specific circumstance).
Secondary (Supporting) Evidence:
Products that are not adequate to document learner achievement but which explain learner behavior (observation checklist), describe an activity that occurred (photograph), or document other circumstances that guide reviewers (comments).
Standardized Tests:
Instruments with specific requirements for administering, timing, scoring and interpreting results that must be abided in order for the results to be considered valid.

Figure 1

or work product, input method, prompt type, and time/date stamp are displayed with the learner's name. The evaluator can then print that screen or save the information as a text-format electronic file. In the portfolio instructional team members can also include specialized Observation Forms used to collect supporting evidence during an assessment. There is a unique Observation Form especially designed to reflect learner characteristics at each specific Stage.

Reports indicate performance-based data and help educators and therapists to gain real insight into a learner's skill acquisition. Learners with cognitive and/or language delays will not generally fall within a typical range. Therefore Stages reports reflect more useful data than norm-referenced scores. This is because the learner's individualized curriculum is being examined and then reported back in language that focuses on specific skills. The software documentation

provides detailed information on how to interpret results and connect the data directly back to the curriculum. This facilitates the direction to take in creating a customized course of content for each individual learner. Educators can see where support is needed, and the manner in which a learner performs most successfully. The learner's individualized goals are always considered over a publisher's criterion, which might not be appropriate.

Conclusion

Stages assessment software allows us to collect Primary Evidence that documents a learner's performance regardless of barriers to a standardized inventory. In fact, learners who have never been able to be tested can be measured in this technology-based, more meaningful content. In addition, Stages activities generate data on an ongoing basis in an environment significantly more suit-

able for learner independence and first-hand functioning. Stages also facilitates the collection of Secondary Evidence through use of the Observation Forms that are uniquely designed to guide watching for specific behaviors during each benchmark activity. Educators, therapists, parents, paraprofessionals and other members of the learner's instructional team can make organized and guided analysis of behaviors that can have significant impact on both the learning as well as the assessment process.

Whether the alternate assessment portfolio is stored in print or electronically, it is important to collect accurate learner performance data over time and in a meaningful way. These results can help guide learning as well as evaluate and document a learner's performance and skills. Stages takes full advantage of adaptive technologies and the computer to create the most effective alternate assessment environment for learners with significant barriers to an evaluation process. Learners can tell us themselves exactly what they have accomplished and then help us understand how to plan ahead for next steps in the learning process.

Alternate assessment is no longer an overwhelming challenge once we use a deliberate and organized approach to resolve the barriers for learners with special needs. With consideration of the definitions above, Stages provides an appropriate vehicle to help us comply with IDEA and include learners with special needs in meaningful and appropriate assessment programs.

Resources

Stages is published by: Assistive Technology, Inc., 7 Wells Ave., Newton, MA 02459; Phone 800-793-9227; Web site <www.assistivetech.com>.

Madalaine Pugliese is the author of Stages and Director for the Assistive Technology Graduate Program at Simmons College in Boston; E-mail: <pugliese@attbi.com>.

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Editor's Note: Versions of this article have also been published in Special Education Technology Practice and the ConnSENSE Bulletin.